

Cheshire's beautiful and fascinating canals are at the forefront of the nation's canal renaissance.

CANAL MANIA

Cheshire's canals are perhaps the most diverse in the country. From the fascinating industrial heritage of the mighty Manchester Ship Canal, which cuts across the Northern edge of the county, to the dramatic Pennine scenery of the Macclesfield Canal in the east, and the serene beauty of the Llangollen Canal in the south-west corner, they not only cover most of the county but also span the history of British canal building.

Cheshire's proximity to Liverpool and Manchester, the hub and heart of the industrial revolution, and to the River Mersey, meant that it was quickly criss-crossed by canals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was the lockless Bridgewater Canal, running from Worsley to Manchester, that set off what came to be known as 'canal mania' when it opened in 1761.

In their heyday, Cheshire's canals carried millions of tonnes of goods, including crude oil, coal and salt. But that didn't last long. By 1830 the railway age had arrived. The canals, slow and sure, were no match for the exhilarating 30 mph speeds notched up by the new locomotives. Their role in the country's economy went into terminal decline and investment fizzled out.

During these wilderness years, the Inland Waterways Association and other dedicated groups campaigned to save canals from closure and promote them for recreational use, with volunteers giving up their weekends to repair and reopen lost and dilapidated waterways.

Now, after decades of under-use and neglect, the national canal network is flourishing again, and Cheshire, with its 135 miles of interlinked, navigable waterways is at the heart of this new canal mania.

A new generation of holidaymakers has been attracted by the colourful narrowboats and slow pace of life on the waterways. Everyone from Hollywood superstars Harrison Ford and Calista Flockhart – spotted on the Llangollen Canal a couple of years

ago – to young and distinctly urban landlubbers are negotiating the locks. Boating holiday companies are doing great business.

The Cheshire Ring, a 97 mile long circular route which is made up from parts of the Macclesfield Canal, the Peak Forest Canal, the Bridgewater Canal and the Trent & Mersey Canal, has never been busier.

"There's a weird and wonderful mix of features specific to Cheshire's canals," explains Peter Birch of British Waterways (BW), which owns most of the county's canals. "They were designed by different engineers and built by local teams of navvies using local materials."

Constructed prior to the modern concept of standardisation, locks, weirs, sluices, walls, bridges, tunnels, towpaths, wharves and aqueducts are all different, not only from each other but also from the rest of the country. At Beeston, for example, an unusual cast iron lock was built in 1805.



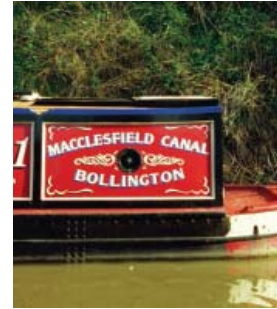
"We're so used to conformity now...that this local distinctiveness is another reason for the popularity of the canals," says Birch. There were also incredible engineering feats, as the canals were hewn through hills or carried across valleys and even existing waterways.

The Peak Forest Canal touches Cheshire only briefly, but has one of its most spectacular features: the Marple Aqueduct and the flight of 16 locks that lift the canal 46m above the Goyt Valley. The Trent & Mersey Canal, built to link the River Trent and the River Mersey, was one of the earliest canals to be completed, in 1777. It runs for 92 miles and has even more locks – one section with 30 locks raises the canal by 90m and is sometimes known as 'Heartbreak Hill'.

At the unique Anderton Boat Lift, boats are lifted between the Trent & Mersey Canal and the River Weaver. This imposing metal structure was built in 1875, at a point where the two waterways run parallel about 120m apart but with a height difference of 15m. It was built to ease the movement of cargoes, particularly salt, to and from the Mersey.

The boat lift was in use until 1983, when it became a victim of the post-war decline in the waterways. Seven million pounds from the heritage lottery fund allowed it to be restored and it reopened in 2002 to lift leisure boats. Today it is one of the most successful tourist attractions on the canals.

Crucially, Cheshire's canals are open for business as well as pleasure. Having recognised the



power of canals to bring in money and drive regeneration, everyone from property developers to heritage organisations and local councils are now involved in restoration. The business of making canals and their infrastructure commercially as well as culturally viable once again is booming.

Boat builders have seen business soar. As well as recreational use, more and more people are buying boats to live on, too. From retired people to first timers looking for an alternative lifestyle or those who have been squeezed out of the housing market, a well equipped canal boat is now a much desired floating home.

Boatbuilder John Dowsett, director of Northern Marine Services in Lymm, has seen a tremendous increase in demand over the past five years. "It started to build up about ten or twelve years ago but it was gradual until the last four or five years when demand shot up," he says.

"The downside is that many boat owners are having difficulty finding moorings and marina spaces," he warns.

To address this problem, British Waterways is encouraging landowners to consider new uses to support the canals. Farmer Michael Cope noticed the big increase in canal boats passing along the

Llangollen Canal, which borders his fields at Swanley Hall Farm near Nantwich. A dairy farmer struggling to stay in business, it made sense to Cope to try to diversify.

"Opening a marina is our answer as it will provide another source of income that will allow us to carry on other farming activities" says Cope. Forty per cent of the marina's 315 moorings were booked before it opened in September 2006.

But it's not all just about boats anymore. Alongside the canals, schemes include everything from repairing towpaths to building new canalside pubs and housing.

Tower Wharf in Chester Basin on the Shropshire Union Canal is a collection of old buildings, in poor repair. It houses Taylor's Boatyard, one of the last boatyards to build wooden boats. BW is working with Chester City Council and a range of other individuals and organisations to secure the ailing fabric of the yard's buildings and restart the business.

On the other side of the county at Macclesfield, a conservation area has been created on the Macclesfield Canal. Working with BW and English Heritage, Congleton and Macclesfield Borough Councils have put together a grants programme for heritage structures within the area.

British Waterways is also working with Cheshire County Council and local borough councils to create the Weaver Way for walkers and cyclists, featuring footbridges and paths that intersect with the canals. On the heritage side, Lion Salt Works on the Trent & Mersey Canal at Marston is being developed as a museum. For some people, it's canalside living that

holds the appeal. People have lived overlooking canals since they were built, though in the past it was mainly because they worked there. The Duke of Bridgewater built a fine house at Runcorn to oversee the building of a flight of locks on his new canal in the 1760s. It's now tucked in-between new apartments. Also at Runcorn, Urban Splash is working with Halton Council to develop two sites next to the Bridgewater Canal.

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For the people that have lived and worked on the canals all their lives, their renaissance is welcome. Maureen Shaw grew up on the working barges, loading crude oil at Stanlow and taking it to the gas tar works at Banbury and Leamington Spa. She still lives at Wardle Lock in Middlewich. "It wasn't all castles and roses," she says. "We worked night and day, pulling gates and paddles, walking behind with the horses."

Maureen sounds a warning note about life on the canals, especially the cold winters, taxes and depreciation in the value of the boats. But as she says, "The canals are vibrant now with holidaymakers and you can live comfortably on a 50 ft boat."